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POP/ROCK

JAZZ GREATS are pictured on a set of trading cards, top and bottom, and rock 'n' roll is the subject of Bop, center.

In Bop, rock 'n' roll has a comic book all its own

By Ken Tucker
Inquirer Popular Music Critic

Such is the cultural and commercial clout of rock 'n' roll that attempts have been made to transfer it to every other art form. There have been rock novels, rock movies, rock operas, rock art (Andy Warhol's portraits of Elvis Presley), even rock ballets. (Twyla Tharp's interpretations of the Beach Boys in *Deuce Coupe*).

Now comes Bop, which its publisher is touting as "America's First & Only Music Comix Magazine." Comic books and rock music have intersected before; there have been comic-book ripoffs of everyone from the Beatles to Kiss. And a lot of the so-called underground comic artists who gained notoriety in the 1960s — Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton foremost among them — displayed what might be called a rock sensibility, drawing cartoons that disturbed and excited their audience in ways similar to those of the best '60s rock musicians.

But Bop is the first comic book to my knowledge that has tried to link comics and rock in an explicit way. Its debut issue, which goes for $2.75, features items as varied as a comic-strip interview with Jerry Lee Lewis; an illustrated reinterpretation of Elvis Costello's song "Mystery Train," a small box of trading cards that, instead of baseball stars, featured beautiful Crumb drawings of blues performers. The second set of these cards, "Early Jazz Greats," has just been released at 58.95.

Each of the 36 cards features a quick biography of the musician on the back, and on the front a portrait, done in soft, dreamy pastels — a lovely tribute to jazz players ranging from Jack Teagarden to Mary Lou Williams. In his other cartoon work, Crumb has always exploited the streak of misanthropy that is at once his genius and his tragic flaw. But it's also well known that Crumb is a passionate devotee of turn-of-the-century vernacular music — early jazz, blues and pop recordings — and that devotion burns in the "Early Jazz Greats" series.

These cards operate as ironical criticism as well, since Crumb has chosen to depict musicians whom he feels have been underrated, or praised for the wrong reasons. He also depicts each jazz player at the age at which that musician made his or her greatest music. The Benny Goodman card, for instance, is a portrait of the clarinetist as a young, ambitious innovator in his mid-20s. It's a subtle method that Crumb executes with cool grace.

"Early Jazz Greats" is available in Philadelphia at Meridian Bookstore, 380 South St., or by mail from Yazoo Records, 245 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10014.

The other area of the arts that has been influenced by rock music is poetry. Poetry-in-rock isn't that new. Since at least as far back as Patti Smith in the mid-'70s, rock has harbored published poets, and who can forget those endless debates in the '60s about whether Bob Dylan's cranky non sequiturs were "real poetry"?

There are many examples of poets who behave like rock stars — attend a poetry reading by writers like Charles Bukowski, John Giorno or Kate Braverman and you'll see what I mean: all those histrionics, all that humor, all that playing to the crowd.

Although modern poets have been recording their work for a long time — heck, you can hear T.S. Eliot mutering his verse on record if you like — it's only recently that poets have used the recording studio in all its complexity as rock artists have done for years. John Giorno runs something called Giorno Poetry Systems that releases first-rate studio and concert recordings of poets performing their heartiest.

And now comes "Voices of the Angels," a two-record collection from Los Angeles that mixes poets and rockers and just about anyone who producer Harvey Kubernik thinks is interesting, all of them reading poems, shouting manifestoes, or just stream-of-consciousness rambling. Featuring more than 40 selections in a staggering variety of styles, "Voices of the Angels" is a fascinating album that can occasionally be annoying but is never boring.

"Voices of the Angels" begins with a standard Bukowski performance — a growled-out "poem" culminating in showy obscenity and cheers from mindless fans. Later on, a rock musician, Dave Alvin of the great rockabilly band the Blasters, proves that he's an excellent poet with a quick, deft piece about Jayne Mansfield that avoids all clichés.

In between, there's all sorts of oddball work, some of it hilarious, some of it infuriating. Sometimes those qualities are combined, as when you listen to Dennis Dragon — the "captain" of the Captain and Tennille — in a 2½-minute screed about how life as an impoverished bum, full of petulant sarcasm about the working world and the sort of breathless illiteracy, stuffed with smug California slang and studded with that's funny for 15 seconds and pathetic the rest of the time.

"Voices of the Angels" has its share of mediocre poetry — when Madeline Ridley began her little recitation with the line "Life in blood" I knew I should have skipped to the next cut — but a lot of this stuff works beautifully. Richard Meltzer, the notoriously innovative TV-food-rock-wrestling critic, contributes a poem called "Wednesday Is a Day for Baldies" that recalls Allen Ginsberg in its long, breath-extending lines and dithering logic. And Danny Sugerman's monologue, "Night Games," is a succinct summation of everything you should avoid (including Sugerman, co-author of that awful Jim Morrison biography, *No One Here Gets Out Alive*) when you visit Los Angeles.

"Voices of the Angels" is $12 by mail from Freeway Records, Box 67930, Los Angeles, Calif. 90067.

Pop topics

Dance," and "Baby Blues," Joe Schwind's marvelous combination of drawings and phrases that transforms infants into jazz musicians in a surreal world.

Bop, featuring the work of more than a dozen artist-writers, is very uneven. By weakest aspects, however, could be corrected easily, since the worst thing about the magazine is not the comic art, but the prose. There are record reviews and bland histories of rock idols that pale beside the bold, challenging cartoons that surround them.

The best story in this first issue of Bop is Marc Hempel's "Teen Beat '63," a summertime version of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" featuring Al Jolson as the Ghost of Pop Music Past, Duane Eddy as the Ghost of Pop Music Present (the tale is set in 1963, after all) and — who else? — the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten as the Ghost of Pop Music Future. "Teen Beat '63" is mean-spirited, funny and outrageous, just the right qualities for a magazine rooted in rock.

Last year, Robert Crumb created an extraordinary synthesis of comic art and music with "Heroes of the Blues," a book that celebrated the lives and work of Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson and other bluesmen. This year, Crumb has created a new synthesis, one that's more personal and more ambitious. It's a subtle method that Crumb executes with cool grace.

"Early Jazz Greats" is available in

Top-selling records

Source: *Billboard* magazine

New albums

TREACHEROUS THREE *What It (Sugarhill)* Rock singles. This is a rap cover not of the Devo hit but of the more influential dance-club song by the Gap Band. The Treacherous Three combine rap vocals, quasi-reggae rhythms, synthesizers and an Isley-band vocalist. Philippe Wynne fit right in. ★★★

THE GRASS ROOTS *Powers of the Night (MCA)* Yes, this is the same Grass Roots that churned out any number of pop-vocal hits in the 1960s. Still led by Rob Grill, the regrouped Roots have spiced up their pace and toughened their sound to catch up with the times — they're actually among today's actively — and under most comeback attempts, they're not bad. Their new album is smooth and catchy, and if their old repertoire doesn't work against them in the minds of radio programmers, the title song would make a decent AM hit. ★★★

ORNETTE COLEMAN *Broken Shadows (Columbia)* Recorded in '71, this session includes Coleman's greatest accompanists — Don Cherry, Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden and Ed Blackwell — and one of his fiercest save-ups, "Happy House." Both the music and the liner notes (which explain certain aspects of Coleman during this period — his "harmolodic" theories were still working themselves out) are smart and beautifully tentative. Lyrical music that was also loud and assertive. ★★★★

DAVID FRIZZELL *The Family's Fine, But This One's All Mine (Warner Bros.)* Frizzell has had success as half of a schlock-country team-up with Shelley West (family is their "hook," you see. He's Lefty's brother, she's Mel Tillis's daughter), but he's also one of the more respected soloists. This solo album is distinguished, if that's the word, by a novelty hit now topping the country charts, "I'm Gonna Hire a Wino to Decorate Our Home," the sort of one-chord joke that is at once the glory and the foolishness of this sort of country music. ★★

JERMAINE JACKSON *Let Me Take Your Fancy (Motown)* Jermaine, abetted by the influence of his brother Michael and his mentor Stevie Wonder to name up with his own groove — a fast pop rhythm that's light and clever. The title song is becoming the hit it deserves. This is an improvement on Jackson's previous albums in that he has kept it and the tune ballad style that slows him down miserably, getting enticed by a series of bad songs. Jermaine, what, exactly, is your point? ★★★

PERE UBU *Song of the Bailing Man (Rough Trade)* An 11-song, 40-rpm album that lacks just over half an hour, this demonstrates real ambition on the part of America's best rackarm-rock rock band. Does Thomas' vocals get more subtle and witty all the time. His latest trick is that he has found a way to "sing" noises and quotation marks around words and phrases, thus underlining their poignancy and irony. There are probably too many going-nowhere melodies even for this band, but the lack of nonsense accompanies to give off a beautifully eerie, steamy feeling that makes playing the entire record at one sitting a compulsion. ★★★★

AILAN DAY *I Surrender (Fiesta)* Day is an English singer-songwriter who sounds like Elvis Costello, only not pretentiously and considerably short on thought and delicacy. The whole album sounds designed for hearing the-of-the-road pop-radio, with many attractive melodic hooks and absolutely nothing else to hold your attention. ★

ROY WOOD *The Singles (Speed Records)* Roy Wood is a Birmingham, England, singer-songwriter who is to London early Beach Boys fan-dances with early Beatles melodies to yield English whimsy that can be so cute it hurts your ears. This album collects his best singles, from his days with The Move to his later solo work. Although I've always admired his pop synthesis, this album also made me realize I like him most when he is not playing one-man-band studio wizard and shows real people to back him up. ★★ — Ken Tucker

★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★ Very good ★★★ Good ★★ Fair ★ Poor

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